

## One Man's Trash

I've never liked garbage. It smells, it's messy, and it was my job to collect it every week from around the house. Thursday nights I'd have to run around the house at 11 o'clock and dump everyone's trash into a paper bag, then drag the bulging cans out to the corner. For a 10 year old, this was a huge hassle. And although I knew it was my parent's fault that I had to do it, I blamed the garbage for wasting my time. It was its fault that I had to get back out of bed because I forgot to collect it. Garbage was to blame for the fact that I lost those precious 10 minutes of my life every week!

But it was Friday mornings that were always the worst. Not only was school awaiting my arrival when I'd rather just lie in bed, but I always got one less hour of sleep. It was on account of the garbage men. They would come down the street, their truck groaning and grinding horrendously, forcing me from my slumber. It was as if they had made it their goal to stop in front of my house and make as much noise as possible, just to spite me.

I hated garbage with a *passion*.

Now that I am older, I still dislike garbage. It still smells, it's still messy, and it's still my job to collect it. But it's become more than just a pet peeve to me. It's become a point of interest. The world's changed since I was younger, and the threat of global warming has become frighteningly real. The amount of garbage and waste has always bothered me, and now it's an even bigger problem than before (if that's even possible)! And the quantity of renewable resources wasted is just a small portion of the issue. Because resources are wasted, more energy and resources are required to replace what

could have been recycled. Not only that, but energy and resources must be spent to get rid of what could be recycled or reused.

Coming from a strong environmentalist family, it's easy to see why garbage became a point of interest for me. My initial intentions for this project were to learn about the problems that garbage causes and what we do that prevents/contributes to them. As my research expanded, however, I became more and more interested in just the process and people associated with garbage. It's such a huge part of our society, and yet no one really seems to know much about it. I wanted to learn more, starting with what happens to the garbage after the city comes and collects it.

Every week they come and take away your garbage, and you never see it again. But what happens to it? It doesn't magically disappear. The trucks have to take it somewhere. So where does it go?

Most people think that their garbage just goes away to a dump, and gets added to the mountains of banana peels, soda cans, and diapers already there. That may be the case in some areas, but in the city of Sunnyvale, your trash doesn't go directly to the dump. It makes a stop at a place called the SMaRT (Sunnyvale Materials Recovery and Transfer) Station first. The SMaRT Station is a waste materials sorting facility, and all of the garbage from Mountain View, Palo Alto, and Sunnyvale ends up there[1]. The facility takes up 10 acres of land and cost \$25 million to build, through a partnership between the three cities[2]. The whole point of the SMaRT station is to sort out the reusable materials in garbage that typically just gets sent straight to the dump. All types of waste are managed there. There is a recycling center (including a California cash refund service), hazardous materials area (for substances like batteries, motor oil, etc), a yard waste area,

electronics handling (for old computers, microwaves, etc), construction debris (concrete, wood), and the main area (called the tipping floor), where residential and corporate waste is handled[3].

How the whole process works is pretty exciting. First, the trucks come in and dump the trash onto the "tipping floor", where workers must separate the larger, cumbersome objects out from the rest of the trash. The larger objects are pushed to the side, and what's left is picked up by bulldozers and pushed onto a series of conveyor belts[4]. The belts carry the trash through long rooms where more workers stand next to them and pull out things like glass bottles, tin cans, newspaper, and the like. The work is repetitive and tiring, requiring the men and women to stand constantly and remain focused.

After the trash runs through the rooms the conveyor belts dump it onto gigantic "shakers". Shakers are like extremely wide escalators, except for the fact that these escalators rapidly shake back and forth and side to side. The shakers are used to break open sealed bags full of trash, and to sift out the small pieces of trash (like egg shells or bottle caps) from the medium pieces[5]. The small pieces move to a separate bin to be compacted, and the medium sized garbage runs through a conveyor belt room once more[6].

As the garbage is carried along the conveyor belts, magnets are used to pull out metallic materials (mostly small items), which are then carried over separate containers and deposited[7]. For larger items, like aluminum cans, something much more high tech is used. Computer guided blasts of compressed air and reverse magnets are used to shoot the cans down slides onto lower, recovery conveyors[8].

The whole system works quite well, with 175 trucks typically delivering to the SMaRT station each day, and only 40 taking what isn't recyclable over to the landfill[9]. In fact, in the 2004-2005 year, the SMaRT Station diverted 82,221 tons of material from the dump, out of the 258318 tons delivered (that's 32%)![10]

The SMaRT Station is definitely an impressive place to be. Walking around the catwalks as the conveyor belts speed past is a strange feeling. The combination of motors, bulldozers, alarms and mariachi music forces you to shout in order to communicate. I found it hard to imagine working in a place like this. Interviews were not allowed with any of the workers, so I had to look elsewhere to learn what it was like to work with garbage. Luckily, Tyler Scull, an acquaintance of mine, worked a brief stint on the tipping floor, and agreed to talk with me.

I learned a lot from talking with Tyler. His workday was rigorous, his co-workers weren't always legal immigrants, and most interestingly, what the garbage actually consisted of. Describing his initial reaction to what he had to pick through, he said, "It was just really surprising to see trucks come from Target or Wal-mart and just dump otherwise good stuff and that just kinda blew my mind. My coworkers would dig out those sixpacks of Gatorade with like one that was busted, and they'd be like "Ok, cool", or like new car seats, or like any number of so much random shit that just was returned and the box was a little bit battered, but other than that it was fine..."[11]

That portion of our conversation really stuck with me. There was garbage going to the dump that was coming directly from store shelves? Perfectly good items were being thrown away? That just didn't make sense. What justification would there be to throw away useful products, - essentially the same as just burning all the resources and energy

required to make it - when people obviously have a need for it? Wouldn't it make more sense to donate those products, so that someone somewhere could benefit from them? Allowing this waste is the equivalent of turning on our cars and letting them burn gasoline as they sit in our driveways.

This discovery angered me. It redirected me back towards the issues of garbage and how we are making it worse. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it really boils down to how people view garbage in the first place. If people had conservative views on garbage, then this sort of waste wouldn't be allowed (or so my train of thought went). I decided to research a little bit more on people's attitudes towards garbage, and see if I could find the root of this waste.

To do so I chose 2 average people to interview. Their only major difference between them was that one had a middle class economic standing and the other had an upper class economic standing (being in Los Altos, I didn't have much of a range of economics to interview). I hoped that maybe this difference could shed some light on two different sides of the issues.

In addition, I disregarded anything I was told about recycling. I determined that basing my conclusion off of information regarding recycling would be a bad idea, because most people recycle these days, and recycling an old, empty, can is much different from keeping an old camera around. A person could happily recycle but just as easily throw out some clothes that are "out of style". Too often recycling is viewed as a sort of "safety blanket" when it comes to being careful about what you throw away. In order to prevent that from clouding my judgment, I just bypassed it and went deeper into their "garbage habits".

The first person I interviewed was the middle classer, named Deborah. When presented with the hypothetical situation of keeping an old object or buying a new one to replace the old object, she said she "would get the new object, but keep the old one anyways." [12] Her reasoning was this: "I typically don't throw away old things. If it still works and does what it's supposed to, it will most likely find a new home in my house. I don't just throw them out because I want a new one." [13] She also described wasteful behavior as "Willful disregard of the retained value of an item...the childish 'gimme gimme gimme, I want something new' attitude." [14]

So it would seem that she falls under the category of "people who disapprove of unnecessary waste" My second interview was with an upper classer by the name of Ellen. When presented with the same situation as Deborah, she gave a very similar answer. "I'd probably by the new item and end up keeping my old one anyways. For example, with our electronics, like computers and stuff, we use the same stuff year after year. It's hard with stuff like that because they become outdated so fast, but I just see it as pointless to keep upgrading over and over again and throw out all that stuff you just bought." [15] Her description of wasteful behavior was as follows: "Getting rid of stuff that still has potential use, like scraps of paper that are necessary for notes or whatever. Throwing stuff like that out instantly is just being wasteful." [16]

So what's the point of all this? What am I getting at? What I'm saying is that my initial assumptions were incorrect. I initially suspected that people were wasteful, and it is that habit of ours that is hurting our world. I thought we were inefficient in our methods of dealing with garbage and unconcerned with what we threw away. My

research has shed some very revealing light on this subject though, which I will break down here:

1) We are not as inefficient in our methods. The SMaRT Station showed me that efforts are actually being made to improve our methods of dealing with garbage. Government actually takes an interest in our effects on the environment, illustrated by the partnership created to make the SMaRT Station possible. Also, we are becoming more and more efficient, illustrated by the many steps in the SMaRT Station, and the amount of precision dedicated to the work there.

2) People's attitudes are more caring. My interviews with the two women of different economic classes showed that even with expendable income, waste is still taken seriously (granted, I only was able to conduct two interviews, but the results were still better than expected). The inexcusable waste seen at the SMaRT Station was not a result of people's disregard for their impacts, but rather a corporation. I suspect it has to do with cost-effectiveness measures and the like.

In conclusion, our garbage is being treated with a great deal of thought concerning the impact it has on our community and environment. Our handling of garbage as a people appears thoughtful and conservative, within reason. It looks like the big issue, then, is the threat of corporate greed and neglect, because it lacks the human element that seems to keep us in line.

----- [1] Welcome to the SMaRT Station. [Sunnyvale]: n.p., n.d. [2]  
Ibid. [3] Ibid. [4] Scull, Tyler. Personal interview. 22 Mar. 2007. [5] Welcome to the  
SMaRT Station. [Sunnyvale]: n.p., n.d. [6] Ibid. [7] Ibid. [8] Ibid. [9] Ibid. [10]  
SMaRT Partnerships. [Sunnyvale]: n.p., 2005. [11] Scull, Tyler. Personal interview. 22  
Mar. 2007. [12] McElwee, Deborah. Personal interview. 2 Apr. 2007. [13] Ibid. [14]  
Ibid. [15] Jaworski, Ellen. Personal interview. 3 Apr. 2007. [16] Ibid.